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# WALT WHITMAN

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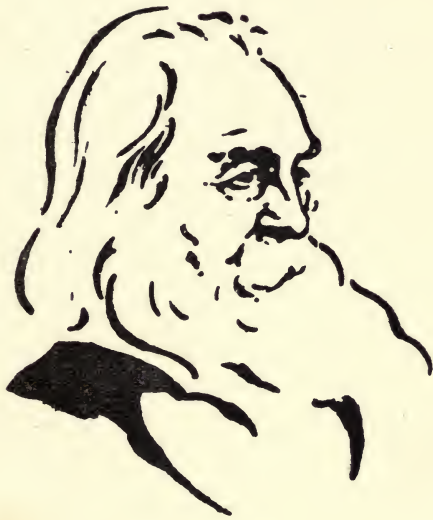
YS WITH THE POETS

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Christmas 1921.

Just to mark the day!





THE OPEN ROAD.

Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me, leading wherever  
I choose.

*(Song of the Open Road).*







A · DAY · WITH  
W A L T  
WHITMAN  
BY MAURICE CLARE, *pseud.*  
*Byron, May Clarissa (Gillington)*



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*In the same Series.*

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*Coleridge.*

*Morris.*

# A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.



**A**BOUT six o'clock on a mid-summer morning in 1877, a tall old man awoke, and was out of bed next moment,—but he moved with a certain slow leisureliness, as one who will not be hurried. The reason of this deliberate movement was obvious,—he had to drag a paralysed leg, which was only gradually recovering its ability and would always be slightly lame. Seen more closely, he was not by any means so old as at first sight one might imagine. His snow-white hair and almost-white grey beard indicated some eighty years : but he was vigorous, erect and rosy : his clear grey-blue eyes were bright with a “wild-hawk look,”—his face was firm and without a line. An air of splendid vital force, despite his infirmity, was diffused from his whole person, and defied the fact of his actual age, which was two years short of sixty.

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Dressing with the same large, leisurely gestures as characterized him in everything, Walt Whitman was presently attired in his invariable suit of grey : and by the time the clock touched half-past seven, he was seated in the verandah, comfortably inhaling the sweet, fresh morning air, and quite ready for his simple breakfast.

In this old farmhouse, in the New Jersey hamlet of White Horse, Walt Whitman had been long an inmate. He was recovering by almost imperceptible degrees from the breakdown induced by over-strain, mental and physical, which had culminated in intermittent paralytic seizures for the last eight years, and had left his robust physique a mere wreck of its former magnificence. Here, in the absolute peace and seclusion of the little wooden house, with its few fields and fruit-trees, he lived in lovable companionship with the farmer-folk, man, wife and sons : and here, the level, faintly undulated country, "neither attractive nor unattractive," supplied all the needs of his strenuous nature and healed him with its calm, curative influences. He steeped

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himself, month by month, season after season, in "primitive solitudes, winding stream, recluse and woody banks, sweet-feeding springs and all the charms that birds, grass, wild-flowers, rabbits and squirrels, old oaks, walnut-trees, etc., can bring." Simple fare, these charms might seem to a townsman: to the "good grey poet" they were not only sufficient but inexhaustible. Dearly as he loved the "swarming and tumultuous" life of cities, the tops of Broadway omnibuses, the Brooklyn ferry-boats, the eternal panorama of the multitude, his true delight was in the vast expanses, the illimitable spaces, the very earth from which, Antæus-like, he drew his vital strength. Out here, in the country solitudes, alone could he observe how—in a way undreamed of by the street-dweller,—

Ever upon this stage  
Is acted God's calm annual drama,  
Gorgeous processions, songs of birds,  
Sunrise that fullest feeds and freshens most  
the soul,  
The heaving sea, the waves upon the shore,  
the musical, strong waves,

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

The woods, the stalwart trees, the slender,  
tapering trees,  
The lilliput countless armies of the grass.  
(*The Return of the Heroes.*)

It may be doubted whether any other poet who has been inspired by outdoor Nature, has approximated so closely as Whitman to the "shows of all variety," which nature presents,—from the infinite gradations of microscopic detail, to the enormous range and sweep of dim vastitudes. His poetry has a huge elemental quality, akin to that of winds and clouds and seas. "To speak with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals, and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside,"—this was the standard he had set himself: and, in pursuance of this ideal, he had given his first and most typically unconventional volume the title "*Leaves of Grass.*" No name could better convey and sum up his meaning in art,—a commixture of the minute and the universal, the simple and the inexplicable, the particular and the all-pervading,—the commonplace which is also the

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miracle : for to Whitman leaves of grass were this and more. "To me," he declared, "as I lean and loaf at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass,"

Every hour of the light and dark is a  
miracle—

Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,

the grass-blades no less so than the "gentle soft-born measureless light." And, avowedly, from these external expressions of nature he derived all power of song—

I hear you whispering there, O stars  
of heaven—

O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual  
transfers and promotions,—

If you do not say anything, how can I say  
anything?

Thus he had arrived at declaring, with august arrogance : "Let others finish specimens—I never finish specimens : I shower them by exhaustless laws as Nature does, fresh and modern continually."

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Nor are you to suppose that this was a late development of nature-worship in a man suddenly confronted with teeming glories and wonderments. All through his life he had been soaking himself in the mysterious loveliness of the world around. "Even as a boy," he wrote, "I had the fancy, the wish, to write a poem about the seashore — that suggesting dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid—that curious, lurking something (as doubtless every objective form finally becomes to the subjective spirit) which means far more than its mere first sight, grand as that is . . . . I felt that I must one day write a book expressing this liquid, mystic theme. Afterward . . . . it came to me that instead of any special lyrical or epical or literary attempt, the seashore should be an invisible *influence*, a pervading gauge and tally for me in my composition." Even as a child, upon the desolate beaches of Long Island, he had, "leaving his bed, wandered alone, bare-headed, barefoot," over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, and explored the secret sources of tragedy that are hidden at the roots of love.



## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

Once Paumanok,  
When the snows had melted—when the  
    lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-  
    month grass was growing,  
Up this sea-shore, in some briers,  
Two guests from Alabama—two together,  
And their nest, and four light-green eggs,  
    spotted with brown,  
And every day the he-bird to and fro near  
    at hand,  
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on  
    her nest, silent, with bright eyes,  
And every day I, a curious boy, never too  
    close, never disturbing them,  
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

. . . . .

Till of a sudden,  
May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,  
One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on  
    the nest,  
Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,  
Nor ever appear'd again.

And thenceforward all summer in the  
    sound of the sea,

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And at night under the full of the moon  
in calmer weather . . . .

Yes, when the stars glisten'd,  
All night long on the prong of a moss-  
scallop'd stake,

Down, almost amid the slapping waves,  
Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears  
. . . . .

I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting  
my hair,

Listen'd long and long . . . . .

*(Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.)*

But now the Stafford family were assembled at breakfast and Walt limped in to join them. Courteously and simply he greeted the various members of the household,—the dark, silent, diligent Methodist father,—the spiritually-minded yet busy-handed mother,—the two young fellows, the married daughter and her little ones. He was the most domesticated, least troublesome of inmates, and his “large sweet presence” imparted something to the homely breakfast-table, something of benignity and tranquillity, which it had lacked before his entrance. “The best man I ever knew,” Mrs.

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Stafford called him. Her sons adored him ; and her grandchildren were almost like his own, in the love and confidence with which they curled themselves upon his great grey knee when the meal was over. For his affection for children, his sense of fatherhood, was a predominant trait of Whitman's character. Lonely, since his mother's death, he had lived as regards the closer human relationships : lonely, in this sense, he was doomed to remain. A veil of secrecy hung over his past life, which none had ever ventured to lift. Rumours of a lost mate, as in the song of the Alabama bird upon the shore,—of children whom he never could claim,—hints of harsh fates and imperious destinies, occasionally penetrated that close-woven curtain of silence which covered his most intimate self. But only in his poems had he voiced his loneliness, and that with the tenderest poignancy of yearning for "better, loftier love's ideals, the divine wife, the sweet, eternal, perfect comrade" . . . . .

That woman who passionately clung to me.  
Again we wander, we love, we separate  
again,

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

Again she holds me by the hand, I must  
not go,  
I see her close beside me with silent lips  
sad and tremulous.

. . . . .

(Be not impatient—a little space—Know you, I  
salute the air, the ocean and the land,  
Every day, at sundown, for your dear sake,  
my love.)

And this was the man who had been blamed  
for his utter lack of “the romantic attitude  
towards women!” But Whitman was no light  
singer of casual empty love-lyrics; he was of  
sterner stuff than that.

No dainty dolce affettuoso I,  
Bearded, sun-burnt, gray-neck'd, forbidding,  
I have arrived.

. . . . .

As breakfast passed, he spoke but little to  
his companions. His ordinary mood of “quiet  
yet cheerful serenity,” lay gently on him, and he  
was content to sit almost silent, emanating that

I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,  
Listen'd long and long. . . . , .  
*(Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking).*









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radiant power, that “effluence and inclusiveness as of the sun,” which none could fail to note in him. When addressed, he only replied with the brief monosyllable “Ay? Ay?” (which he pronounced *Oy? Oy?*), and which, slightly inflected to answer various purposes, served him for all response.

The meal was not yet over, for most of the family, when Whitman, rising abruptly with that startling *brusquerie* which occasionally offended his friends, observed “Ta-ta!” to everybody in general and departed—“as if he didn’t care if he never saw us again!” remarked one of the young men. He left the house and strolled down the green lane, to a wide wooded hollow, where the stream called Timber Creek went winding among its lily-leaves beneath the trees. Here Whitman had found, a year before, “a particularly secluded little dell off one side by my creek . . . filled with bushes, trees, grass, a group of willows, a straggling bank and a spring of delicious water running right through the middle of it, with two or three little cascades. Here (he) retreated every hot day” (*Specimen Days*),—and here, while the

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summer sun drew sweet aromatic odours from the tangled water-mints and cresses, he proceeded slowly now, carrying a portable chair, and with his pockets filled with note-books ; for, as he truly avowed, “ Wherever I go, winter or summer, city or country, alone at home or travelling, I *must* take notes.” He was about to make sure of a morning’s unmitigated delight, —in the spot where he sought, “ every day, seclusion—every day at least two or three hours of freedom, bathing, no talk, no bonds, no dress, no books, no manners.”

And each step of the way was a pure joy to him. “ What a day ! ” he murmured, “ what an hour just passing ! the luxury of riant grass and blowing breeze, with all the shows of sun and sky and perfect temperature, never before so filling me body and soul ! ” So rhapsodizing inwardly and drinking in the beauty of sight and sound, he proceeded, “ still sauntering on, to the spring under the willows—musical as soft clinking glasses—pouring a sizeable stream, pure and clear, out from its vent where the bank arches over like a great brown shaggy eyebrow or mouth-roof—gurgling, gurgling ceaselessly ;

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meaning, saying something, of course (if one could only translate it.)” (*Specimen Days.*)

Here he sat down awhile and revelled in sheer joy of summer opulence. He enumerated to himself,—laying a store of lovely recollections for future reference in darker days,—“The fervent heat, but so much more endurable in this pure air—the white and pink pond-blossoms, with great heart-shaped leaves, the glassy waters of the creek, the banks, with dense bushery and the picturesque beeches and shade and turf; the tremulous, reedy call of some bird from recesses, breaking the warm, indolent, half-voluptuous silence: the prevailing delicate, yet palpable, spicy, grassy, clovery perfume to my nostrils,—and over all, encircling all, to my sight and soul, the free space of the sky, transparent and blue,” (*Specimen Days,*) and, “from old habit, pencilled down from time to time, almost automatically, moods, sights, hours, tints and outlines, on the spot.” Minutes like these were the seed time of his art, if that can be called art which was almost one with Nature. For Walt Whitman had, from the very outset, striven to obtain that fusion of identity with

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*Natura Benigna*, which, even if only momentary, bequeathes a lasting impression on the mind. He had always felt, with regard to his productions, that "There is a humiliating lesson one learns, in serene hours, of a fine day or night. Nature seems to look on all fixed-up poetry and art as something almost impertinent. . . . If I could indirectly show that we have met and fused, even if but only once, but enough — that we have really absorbed each other and understood each other,"—it sufficed him. Nothing less did : for he recognised that "after you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality, love and so on — have found that none of these finally satisfy, or permanently wear — what remains ? Nature remains : to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, changes of seasons — the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night." And, while confessing, "I cannot divest my appetite of literature, yet I find myself eventually trying it all by Nature—*first premises* many call it, but really the crowning results of all, laws, tallies and proofs . . . . I have fancied the ocean and the daylight, the mountain

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and the forest, putting their spirit in a judgment on our books. I have fancied some disembodied soul giving its verdict." (*Specimen Days*.) He was "so afraid," as he phrased it, "of dropping what smack of outdoors or sun or starlight might cling to the lines—I dared not try to meddle with or smooth them." To be "made one with Nature," in a deeper sense than ever any man yet had known, was, in short, his ideal,—and, one may say, his achievement. For the verdict of the average person, vacant of *his* glorious gains, he did not care. Regardless of ridicule, calumny, contumely, he had pursued his own way to his own goal: till he was able at last to realize his dream of

Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature,  
Master of all, or mistress of all—aplomb in  
the midst of irrational things.

And now he was an old man, to look upon, —yet a man surcharged with electric vigour and daily renewing his physical strength from the fountains of eternal youth. He was just as full of *élan*, of enterprise, of the glorious hunger for adventure, as when first he had proclaimed,—

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Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open  
road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me, leading  
wherever I choose.

Allons ! to that which is endless, as it was  
beginningless,  
To undergo much, tramps of days, rests  
of nights,  
To merge all in the travel they tend to,  
and the days and nights they tend to,  
Again to merge them in the start of  
superior journeys ;  
To see nothing anywhere but what you  
may reach it and pass it,  
To look up or down no road but it stretches  
and waits for you—however long, but  
it stretches and waits for you ;  
To see no being, not God's or any, but you  
also go thither.

*(Song of the Open Road.)*

The big grey man expanded almost visibly  
in the sun-steeped air, as he absorbed the  
exquisite minutiae of the green dell into his

THE LUMBERMEN'S CAMP.

Lumbermen in their winter camp, day-break in the woods, stripes of snow on the limbs of trees, the occasional snapping,

The glad clear sound of one's own voice, the merry song, the natural life of the woods, the strong day's work,

The blazing fire at night, the sweet taste of supper, the talk, the bed of hemlock boughs, and the bear-skin.

*(Song of the Broad-Axe).*









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mind, and assimilated the music of the wind and stream. Sound of any sort had a powerfully emotional effect upon him. It was not mere fancy on Whitman's part that "he and Wagner made one music." With music on the most colossal scale his poems are fraught from end to end : and while their technical form may be less finished, less perfected, than those of other authors, — while they have less melody, they have the multitudinous harmony, the superb architectonics, the choral and symphonic movement of the noblest masters. "Such poems as *The Mystic Trumpeter*, *Out of the Cradle*, *Passage to India*, have the genesis and exodus of great musical compositions." And to many auditors, the "vast elemental sympathy" of this unique personality can only be compared to that of Beethoven, whom he said he had "discovered as a new meaning in music : " Beethoven, by whom he allowed he "had been carried out of himself, seeing, hearing wonders : " Beethoven, who, like himself, sought inspiration continuously in the magic and mystery of Nature.

And thus, all Whitman's finest poems have a processional air, like the evolution of some

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great symphony—a pageantry of sound, so to speak, which whirls one forward like a leaf upon a resistless stream. Sometimes he is superbly triumphant, as in his inaugural *Song of Myself* :

With music strong I come—with my cornets  
and my drums,  
I play not marches for accepted victors  
only,  
I play great marches for conquer'd and slain  
persons.

Sometimes he translates the sonorities of the air into immortal effluences of meaning :

Hark, some wild trumpeter—some strange  
musician,  
Hovering unseen in air, vibrates capricious  
tunes to-night. . . .

Blow, trumpeter, free and clear—I follow  
thee,

While at thy liquid prelude, glad, serene,  
The fretting world, the streets, the noisy  
hours of day, withdraw ;

or he blends all sorts and conditions of beautiful resonance into, surely, the strangest yet loveliest love-song ever yet set down :

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

I heard you, solemn-sweet pipes of the organ,  
as last Sunday morn I pass'd the church,  
Winds of autumn, as I walked the woods at  
dusk, I heard your long-stretch'd sighs  
up above so mournful,

I heard the perfect Italian tenor singing at  
the opera, I heard the soprano in the  
midst of the quartet singing ;

Heart of my love ! you too I heard mur-  
muring low through one of the wrists  
around my head,

Heard the pulse of you, when all was still,  
ringing little bells last night under  
my ear.

But now the precious hour had arrived,  
which to Whitman spelt revivification and  
rejuvenescence above all others : the time when,  
stripped of all externals, he became the very  
child of Mother Earth. In his own description  
of the process :

“A light south-west wind was blowing  
through the tree-tops. It was just the place  
and time for my Adamic air-bath. . . . So,  
hanging clothes on a rail near by, keeping old  
broadbrim straw on head and easy shoes on feet

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

. . . . . then partially bathing in the clear waters of the running brook—taking everything very leisurely, with many rests and pauses . . . . . slow negligent promenades on the turf up and down in the sun . . . somehow I seemed to get identity with each and everything around me, in its condition. Perhaps the inner, never-lost rapport we hold with earth, light, air, trees, etc., is not to be realized through eyes and mind only, but through the whole corporeal body.” (*Specimen Days.*)

Power and joy and exhilaration infused his whole frame. “Here,” he murmured, “I realize the meaning of that old fellow who said he was seldom less alone than when alone. Never before did I get so close to Nature: never before did she come so close to me.”

And a miracle of transient transformation had been wrought upon him. His youth was “renewed like the eagle’s,” his lameness hardly perceptible, as he reluctantly emerged from the sweet water, and, having dried himself in the sun-glow, still more reluctantly dressed again. This was no longer the

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“battered, wrecked old man,” the veteran of life-long battles with the world: but one who could realize with keenest perception every sensation of stalwart strength. He might have been, at this moment, one of his own “lumbermen in their winter camp,” enjoying

Day-break in the woods,  
stripes of snow on the limbs of trees,  
the occasional snapping,  
The glad clear sound of one's own voice,  
the merry song, the natural life of the  
woods, the strong day's work,  
The blazing fire at night, the sweet taste of  
supper, the talk, the bed of hemlock  
boughs, and the bear-skin.  
(*Song of the Broad-Axe.*)

or a scion of the “youthful sinewy races,”  
whom he had chanted in *Pioneers*:

Come, my tan-faced children,  
Follow well in order, get your weapons  
ready;

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

Have you your pistols? have you your  
sharpedged axes?

Pioneers! O pioneers! . . .

All the past we leave behind!  
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world,  
varied world;  
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world  
of labour and the march,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Here at last was the true Walt Whitman,  
superabundant in splendid vitality and conscious  
of mental and physical power through every  
fibre of his being.

One last longing, loving look he cast upon  
the creek before returning homewards. The  
magnificent mid-noon lay full-tide over all,  
brimming the uttermost shores of beauty: it  
was the very apotheosis of summer, the tangible  
realization of Whitman's prophetic vision.

All, all for immortality,  
Love like the light silently wrapping all,  
Nature's amelioration blessing all,



THE PIONEERS.

All the past we leave behind!

We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, . . . .

Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains  
steep. . .

Pioneers! O Pioneers!

*(Pioneers.)*







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The blossoms, fruits of ages, orchards divine  
and certain,

Forms, objects, growths, humanities, to  
spiritual images ripening.

Give me, O God, to sing that thought,

Give me, give him or her I love this  
quenchless faith,

In Thy ensemble, whatever else withheld  
withhold not from us

Belief in plan of Thee enclosed in Time  
and Space,

Health, peace, salvation universal.

Is it a dream ?

Nay but the lack of it the dream,

And failing it life's lore and wealth a dream,

And all the world a dream.

. . . . .

Now he passed back up the lane to the little farmstead, and, entering in, found the midday meal was served. Mr. Stafford was already seated and about to say grace. Whitman stopped as he passed behind the farmer's chair, and clasping Stafford's head in his large,

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well-formed hands, became an actual part, as it were, in the benediction. Then he took his seat in silence. But that irrepressible joyousness which sometimes, after working on a manuscript, seemed to shine from his face and pervade his whole body,—that “singular brightness and delight, as though he had partaken of some divine elixir”—was visible now upon his noble features. He talked a little, in simple homely phrases, — giving little idea of the voluminous reserve force within him : telling little incidents of the War of Secession and anecdotes of his hospital experiences. He had been a volunteer nurse of exquisite patience and admirable efficiency throughout those terrible years 1862-64. His passionate tenderness and sympathy then found vent : and he gave his best and uttermost : believing that (in his own words) “these libations, extatic life-pourings, as it were, of precious wine or rose-water on vast desert-sands or great polluted rivers, taking chances of *no return*,—what are they but the theory and practice . . . of Christ or of all divine personality?” For in the human, however defaced, he still could discern the divine and immortal. The worth of every

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individual soul was the pivot of all his arts and beliefs :

“ Because, having looked at the objects of the Universe, I find there is no one, nor any particle of one, but has reference to the soul.”

Usually, to his sensitive mind, able as it was to realise with the keenest sympathy every phase of human suffering, the memories of carnage were repulsive. By day he could shut them off : but by night, he said,

In clouds descending, in midnight sleep, of  
many a face in battle,  
Of the look at first of the mortally wounded,  
of that indescribable look,  
Of the dead on their backs, with arms  
extended wide—

I dream, I dream, I dream.

*(Old War Dreams.)*

But he had faith in the future of his country, vast hopes in the purification wrought out by those sorrowful years : and his poem *To the Man-of-War Bird* was but one of many allegories in which he saw his beloved America rising transfigured from the ashes of the past.

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Thou who hast slept all night upon the  
storm,  
Waking renew'd on thy prodigious pinions,  
(Burst the wild storm? above it thou  
ascended'st,  
And rested on the sky, thy slave that  
cradled thee,) . . . .

Thou born to match the gale, (thou art  
all wings,)  
To cope with heaven and earth and sea and  
hurricane,  
Thou ship of air that never furl'st thy sails,  
Days, even weeks untired and onward,  
through spaces, realms gyrating,  
At dusk that look'st on Senegal, at morn  
America,  
That sport'st amid the lightning-flash and  
thunder-cloud,  
In them, in thy experiences, had'st thou  
my soul,  
What joys! what joys were thine!

and out of the smoke and din of conflict, he  
believed, should spring "the most splendid race  
the sun ever shone upon," knit in sublime unity  
of brotherhood.



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Dinner over, Whitman retired awhile to his own apartment: that fearful chaos of pell-mell untidiness which was the delight of its occupant and the despair of Mrs. Stafford. An indescribable confusion it was of letters, newspapers and books,—an inkbottle on one chair, a glass of lemonade on another, a pile of MSS. on a third, a hat on the floor. . . . Imper- turbably composed, the poet surveyed his best-loved books, — Scott, Carlyle, Tennyson, Emerson, — translations of Homer, Dante, Hafiz, Saadi: renderings of Virgil, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius,—versions of Spanish and German poets: most well-worn of all, Shakespeare and the Bible. Finally, out of the heterogeneous collection he selected George Sand's *Consuelo* and seated himself at the window with it. On another afternoon he would have returned to the creek, but to-day he was expecting a friend.

And friends, with him, did not mean mere acquaintances: still less those visitors who were brought by vulgar curiosity. Although the best of comrades and one who found companionship most exhilarating, he had a bed-rock of deep

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

reserve, and “to such as he did not like, he became as a precipice.” But to those with whom he was truly *en rapport*,—whether by letter or in the flesh,—he was spendthrift of his personality. His English literary friends,—Tennyson, Rossetti, Buchanan, Browning and others, had supplied the financial aid which enabled him to recuperate at Timber Creek: compatriots such as Emerson, John Burroughs, and a host of old-time friends were welcome visitors. But nothing in his life or in his literary fortunes, he declared, had brought him more comfort and support—nothing had more spiritually soothed him—than the “warm appreciation and friendship of that true full-grown woman,” Anne Gilchrist, the sweet English widow who was now staying with her children in Philadelphia, to be within easy reach of Whitman. “Among the perfect women I have known (and it has been very unspeakable good fortune to have had the very best for mother, sisters and friends), I have known none more perfect,” wrote the poet, “than my dear, dear friend, Anne Gilchrist.” It was this warm-hearted, courageous Englishwoman, “alive with humour and vivacity,” whose musical voice was

THE MAN-OF-WAR BIRD.

Thou born to match the gale, (thou art all wings,)  
To cope with heaven and earth and sea and hurricane,  
Thou ship of air that never furl'st thy sails,  
Days, even weeks untired and onward, through spaces,  
    realms gyrating,  
At dusk that look'st on Senegal, at morn America,  
That sport'st amid the lightning-flash and thunder-  
    cloud,  
In them, in thy experiences, had'st thou my soul,  
What joys ! what joys were thine !

*(To the Man-of-War Bird.)*







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shortly heard outside, enquiring for Walt. He hastened down to receive her.

Anne Gilchrist's opinion of Whitman was even more enthusiastic than his appreciation of her. She admired and revered the courage with which he expounded his theories of life, no less than the expression of them in words which, as she put it, ceased to be words and became electric streams. "What more can you ask of the words of a man's mouth," she exclaimed, "than that they should absorb into you as food and air, to reappear again in your strength, gait, face—that they should be fibre and filter to your blood, joy and gladness to your whole nature?" She alone, of all women, and almost alone among men, had stood forth to defend him for the "fearless and comprehensive dealing with reality" which had alienated the conventional and offended the prudish—and she alone was the recipient, now, of his most intimate thoughts and aspirations.

They sat together on the shady piazza, and he unfolded to her, while her children played around, the hopes and wishes of his heart not

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

only for America but for all humanity. He said, "My original idea was that if I could bring men together by putting before them the heart of man with all its joys and sorrows and experiences and surroundings, it would be a great thing. . . . I have endeavoured from the first to get free as much as possible from all literary attitudinism—to strip off integuments, coverings, bridges—and to speak straight from and to the heart; . . . to discard all conventional poetic phrases, and every touch of or reference to ancient or mediæval images, metaphors, subjects, styles, etc., and to write *de novo* with words and phrases appropriate to our own days." He took her hand as he spoke, as was his wont with a sympathetic listener, and gazed with eagerness into her serious yet easily-lighted face. His "terrible blaze of personality" was subdued for the nonce into that child-like simplicity, that woman-like tenderness, which constituted some of his chief charms.

They discussed the work of contemporary poets, English and American. Whitman, however much he differed from these in theory and method, gave generous homage to their



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varied genius. He loved to declaim the *Ulysses* and kindred majestically-rolling passages of Tennyson, in a clear, strong, rugged tone, devoid of all elocutionary tricks or affectation. He never spoke a line of his own verse, but to recite from Shakespeare was a great pleasure to him : and he compared the Shakespearean plays to large, rich, splendid tapestry, like Raffaele's historical cartoons, where everything is broad and colossal. For Scott, whose work, he said, breathed more of the open air than the workshop, he had unfeigned admiration. Dramatic work and music in all its forms he discussed with knowledge and fervour. As for the poets of America, he poured encomium upon them ungrudgingly. "I can't imagine any better luck befalling these States for a poetical beginning and initiation than has come from Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant and Whittier." (*Specimen Days.*)

The afternoon shadows stretched themselves out, and at sunset Mrs. Gilchrist and her children departed. It had been for her a memorable afternoon : and Whitman had been thoroughly in his element as comrade of so

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

congenial a soul. Now, as the twilight deepened, he devoted himself to the consideration of the deepest notes in the whole diapason of human existence. Never was a man of more exuberant a joy in life: never one who gazed more courageously into the dim-veiled face of Death,—the sower of all enigmas, the comforter of all pain.

Whispers of heavenly death, murmur'd  
I hear ;  
Labial gossip of night—sibilant chorals ;  
Footsteps gently ascending — mystical  
breezes, wafted soft and low. . . .

(Did you think Life was so well provided  
for—and Death, the purport of all Life,  
is not well provided for ?) . . .

I do not doubt that whatever can possibly  
happen, any where, at any time, is pro-  
vided for, in the inherences of things ;  
I do not think Life provides for all, and for  
Time and Space—but I believe Heavenly  
Death provides for all.

*(Whispers of Heavenly Death.)*

And his heart once more, as in the match-  
less threnody for Lincoln, *When Lilacs last in the*

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

*dooryard bloomed*, uttered its song of summons and of welcome.

Come, lovely and soothing Death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriv-  
ing, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later, delicate Death. . . .

Dark Mother, always gliding near, with  
soft feet,  
Have none chanted for thee a chant of  
fullest welcome?  
Then I chant it for thee—I glorify thee  
above all.

The skies deepened into purple, and the march of the stars began: it was the sacreddest hour of the day to Whitman, a period consecrated and set apart above all. "I am convinced," thought he, "that there are hours of Nature, especially of the atmosphere, mornings and evenings, addressed to the soul. Night transcends, for that purpose, what the proudest day can do." (*Specimen Days.*)

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

And a new buoyancy quickened in his soul; the indomitable spirit of enterprise revived within him. Now, at eleven at night, he was more exhilarated in mind than his body had been in the blue July morning: and, casting one comprehensive glance upon the burning arcana of the heavens, that he might carry into his sleep a memory of that glory, he "desired a better country," with longing and deep solicitude.

Bathe me, O God, in Thee, mounting  
to Thee,  
I and my soul to range in range of Thee!

. . . . .

Passage to more than India!  
O secret of the earth and sky!  
Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding  
creeks and rivers!  
Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong  
mountains of my land!  
Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!  
O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!  
O day and night, passage to you!

## A DAY WITH WALT WHITMAN.

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius  
and Jupiter!

Passage to you! . . .

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all  
the seas of God?

O farther, farther, farther sail!

*(Passage to India.)*





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